

Planning--Will It Make A Difference?

Hamilton County, Ohio



HAMILTON COUNTY

Regional
Planning
Commission

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BY

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The following commentary explores the driving forces of suburban development patterns in the United States and the strategic initiatives of the Hamilton County Regional Planning Commission to plan within this constrained environment. This commentary was presented at a fund raising event for the League of Women Voters Education Fund at their annual luncheon – “Visions For Greater Cincinnati” on March 16, 2000.

Planning—will it make a difference? This is a difficult question for a planner to confront. All of us want to believe that we are making a difference. An even more troubling question is: Will the difference that is made--i.e., the outcomes resulting from community and regional planning initiatives--be desirable?

These are important questions, because our region is currently investing in lots of planning initiatives. I'm not speaking of just the planning efforts of Hamilton County's and Cincinnati's planning departments, but also the multitude of other planning efforts, such as:

- OKI's Land Use Commission,
- Metropolitan Growth Alliance – The Regional Framework,
- Citizens for Civic Renewal – a variety of planning initiatives,
- League of Women Voters -- Regional Sustainability Indicators project,
- Smart Growth Coalition – A Bio-Region Plan,
- Mill Creek Restoration Project – Greenway Master Plan,
- Regional Cultural Alliance – Regional Cultural Plan
- First Suburbs Consortium – various local and statewide planning initiatives
- Greater Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce -- Partnership for Greater Cincinnati,
- Hamilton County Regional Planning Commission -- County-wide Comprehensive Plan.

This is just a few of the current planning initiatives that affect Hamilton County. There are many more – such as the local plans of our 49 political jurisdictions in Hamilton County, as well as the planning efforts in the 347 jurisdictions in our region.

This is a lot of civic capital being invested in planning!

In attempting to answer the question – Will Planning make a difference? -- my remarks will focus on the suburban environment and within that suburban environment I'll focus on the overpowering forces that drive and constrain community planning initiatives.

I'll present some divergent views on whether community planning is moving in the correct direction. And, I'll conclude with a summary of the Planning Partnership initiative of the Hamilton County Regional Planning Commission – an alliance that is being designed to assure that planning will make a desirable difference, in this county, in the 21st Century.

The Effect of Planning in the Last Century (per Proponents and Opponents of Suburbanization)

In reviewing the effect of planning on the suburban environment, there are two widely divergent views.

A rather depressing and critical view of the outcomes of community and regional planning is offered by Howard Kunstler. In "*Home from Nowhere*", he condemns the social, environmental and economic cost, as well as the appearance, of the sprawling communities that we have built.

He says with great passion: "We drive up and down the gruesome, tragic suburban boulevards of commerce, and we're overwhelmed at the fantastic, awesome, stupefying ugliness of absolutely everything in sight as though the whole thing had been designed by some diabolical force bent on making human beings miserable."

This guy is not happy about the effect of planning – assuming that planning had something to do with creating this awful world he describes.

Unfortunately, there really are some places within this county that actually make me feel this way.

DRIVING FORCES.

An opposite view is presented by proponents of the status quo. In their view during the last century, community planning initiatives and related development patterns have already implemented the visions of the middle class. To them, we have achieved the American Dream. This is a dream promoted to the middle class as the romance of "the frontier" since 1950. A dream--as David Rusk says--that has been promoted by the driving forces of 'Washington, Wall Street, Detroit, Hollywood, and Madison Avenue' (and today perhaps we should add Silicon Valley).

He goes on to say that these icons, these driving forces, "have produced cheap home mortgages, dream houses, affordable private cars, federally subsidized highways and sustained economic growth". The result -- a profound fondness for suburban and semi-rural living.

THE FORCE OF GENERAL MOTORS CORP.

One of the icons, one of these driving forces identified by Rusk, is Detroit – or the automobile. At the 1939 World's Fair, the most popular exhibition was General Motor's "World of Tomorrow", featuring an enormous model of an auto-utopia called "City of the Future".

GM's "City of the Future – their World of Tomorrow" is what we live in today. Indeed, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reformers, who viewed the congestion of the city as a profound evil would have looked at today's decentralization – our dispersed and multi-centered region -- as an improvement too good to be imagined.

In the view of proponents of suburbia as built in the last century, the net effects of conventional development patterns are overwhelmingly positive. They do not subscribe to critiques identifying the horrors of sprawl. Instead, they see vibrant suburban neighborhoods, contributing to economic growth and to the social objective of widespread homeownership in an automobile utopia —exactly as envisioned by the 1939 Worlds Fair.

An unprecedented 67 percent of Americans now own their own homes. So proponents of the last century's suburbanization say that the negative effects of sprawl are just part of the price we're paying for creating the world's first mass upper-middle class.

Residents of suburban neighborhoods are great champions of suburban living. Indeed, the suburban neighborhood—with or without the label of sprawl—is exactly what most suburban residents want. That's why they live there! In their view, the utopic visions of the 1940's and 1950's have been achieved—Why fix what isn't broke?

THE FORCE OF CHEAP MOBILITY.

Another icon or driving force is Washington, or more specifically, federal policies related to mobility. The National Defense Highway Act of 1956 created the interstate highway system for quick inter-city and inter-coastal mobility and to deliberately disperse industry into the countryside – theoretically making it less vulnerable to nuclear attack. A gargantuan side effect has been sprawling suburbanization with all of its negative consequences.

THE FORCE OF CHEAP MONEY

The Federal Housing Administration and the availability of money after World War II created another suburbanization driver – the guaranteed mortgage. This financial instrument built the American suburbs with low down-payment, long term, fixed interest mortgages, essentially riskless to banks and relatively unique on our planet.

THE FORCE OF CHEAP ENERGY.

Another federal policy that drives our development patterns is subsidized energy (for transportation and housing). This federal policy masks the high operating costs of suburbia. Artificially cheap energy is perhaps the greatest obstacle to achieving smart growth and new urbanism in the U.S.

I like to call this outcome of cheap energy, the "refrigerator effect". Here's why. In our American culture cheap energy allows us to live the suburban life, with large homes, multiple vehicles, long commutes to our jobs, and gigantic refrigerators and freezers. The huge ice boxes in American kitchens eliminate the need for daily shopping, and unfortunately, eliminates a daily ritual found in vibrant neighborhoods. This "refrigerator theory" may seem a bit bizarre, but it has profound consequences in our social and development patterns.

In contrast, the European experience, with heavy taxation of gasoline and high rates for electric power and furnace fuels, makes it necessary to live in compact development patterns and in apartments with small refrigerators. However, these are the quaint villages and vibrant market places that we fly thousands of miles to visit.

In the U.S., Portland is attempting to overcome the constraining forces of American culture and the driving forces of the giant American refrigerator. Their new vision is now depicted by the motto of Mayor Vera Katz. She says, “if you get up Sunday morning and find out that you do not have orange juice, and you have to get into the car to get it, we haven’t done our job.”

This is not, of course, really an orange juice issue! She is, with ingenious simplicity defining Portland’s goals related to mobility and air quality.

How many of you live in neighborhoods that would pass “Portland’s orange juice test”?

Their mobility and air quality goals are also simply defined by two outcome statements: Every child can walk to a library and every residence has a view of Mt Hood. Portland has a collective vision and therefore, planning will make a difference.

THE FORCE OF THE INTERNET.

New levels of inertia, are also expected to affect suburbanization. This force emanates from technology and the internet. Digital electronics will continually make it possible for cities to become more and more dispersed and polarized since office work will travel rather than office workers. The irrelevance of geography will continue to drive the trend toward rural and decentralized workplaces.

THE FORCE OF WEAK LEGISLATION -- OHIO LAW.

The last driving force that I’ll mention is the force of weak legislation. Every region in the country that has made a major difference through planning and collaboration has had the support of enlightened state enabling legislation – with appropriate carrots and sticks.

Ohio’s planning legislation is one of the most antiquated and weakest in the nation. The importance and urgency of changing our state legislation, as a foundation for successful regional planning, has been confirmed by a parade of planning experts that have recently studied our region.

This includes David Rusk, William Hudnut, and Michael Gallis. You will hear the same message from Myron Orfield in May. No sustainable advances in regionalism or smart growth will occur in this state until state legislation is updated.

These are a few of many behemoth federal and state policies that continue to drive the suburban character of our region. These policies overpower many local and regional planning initiatives – and this is the environment that we are planning in.

The Need and Potential for Change (Entrenched Development Patterns)

Even though planning has been largely directed by the forces of federal and state policies in the 20th century, it appears to many that a change is now needed. Is it time to overhaul the American dream?

Robert Davis, chairman of the Congress for New Urbanism, describes our entrenched development pattern. He says, we need to end our fifty-year-long national experiment in wretched excess that endorses disposable communities, drains life from cities, devours open space, siphons precious time off to automobile travel, creates social and economic polarization, and leaves a trail of washed-up neighborhoods and shopping centers in its wake.

He identifies an urgent need for planning to be different in the 21st Century since the old suburban dream is becoming increasingly out of sync with today's culture.

Peter Calthorpe in *The Next American Metropolis*, says, "we continue to build post-World War II suburbs as if families were large and had only one breadwinner, as if the jobs were all downtown, as if land and energy were endless, and as if another lane on the freeway would end traffic congestion."

The direction of planning needs to change because historical circumstance has changed. The urban environment is no longer the slum and coal-belching industrial environment that drove people from the city in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Nor are we preparing for pent-up housing demand as required in the post-World War II years. Values have changed and we have now superseded the 1939 World's Fair vision.

Our post 1950 development forces have locked both the city and suburb in a mutually negating evolution toward patterns of growth that create congestion, pollution, flooding, separation of jobs from workers, urban disinvestments, disposable towns, declining schools, meaner streets, and rising taxes.

These issues are of deep concern to the Hamilton County Regional Planning Commission and to the greater Cincinnati metropolitan region as we begin to initiate studies to update the County's comprehensive plan.

A Plan for Planning (Making a Difference in Hamilton County)

Given this planning environment, with the momentum of entrenched external forces, how are we going to make a difference?

In Hamilton County, the RPC is forming a partnership to assure that planning makes a difference. In collaboration with the BCC, and the planning commissions and planning committees of the County's 12 townships and 37 municipalities, the RPC is establishing a new

Planning Partnership – an alliance that fits the needs of Hamilton County communities in the 21st Century.

This Partnership is being developed to include other public sector, as well as, private sector and civic sector organizations engaged in planning in the County.

STRATEGIC PLAN.

After completing a strategic planning process (a “Plan for Planning”), the RPC convened potential planning partners to assist in improving its effectiveness. Organizational changes are now being drafted in a Resolution of Cooperation (a charter and interjurisdictional agreement) for the revised commission and the new Planning Partnership.

While supporting local autonomy and home rule, the Partnership is being designed to provide a new structure that promotes collaboration on countywide issues in the context of our existing fragmented political structure. This new charter will revise the general terms of agreement of the RPC – hopefully with 49 local government partners. The charter will also establish the Planning Partnership as a standing committee – a collaborative planning and coordinating committee for advance comprehensive planning in Hamilton County.

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN.

The primary immediate focus of the Planning Partnership will be the oversight of Hamilton County’s Comprehensive Plan. The citizen and stakeholder involvement phase is being modeled after the successful process of the National Issues Forum of the League of Women Voters.

The planning dialogue related to Hamilton County’s comprehensive plan will focus on how we want to live in the future--in the context of competing objectives and priorities – employment, environment, housing, transportation, education, aesthetics, social diversity, economic diversity, etc.

- How can we accommodate people throughout their life cycles?
- How can we accommodate new social trends affecting the family unit and the work unit?
- How much growth should be encouraged?
- Where and when should it occur?
- What type of growth should be encouraged?
- How do we reverse the population loss and disinvestment in the older suburbs?
- How do we form a unified voice for regional and state funding proposals?

These are some of the important issue areas that we will be discussing as we launch a variety of citizen involvement initiatives this summer.

With 49 political jurisdictions in Hamilton County (and as many planning commissions) as well as over 600 planning and zoning commissioners, the County’s lack of a collective vision is not a great surprise to anyone.

We have a lot of players on the field; but, we all know that just putting players on the field does not create a competitive team. They have to work together. So, the good news is that we have a wealth of human resources involved in planning -- a lot of effort is expended and a lot of

potential exists. The bad news is that we have rampant fragmentation in community planning -- an important and fundamental problem for Hamilton County.

MICHAEL GALLIS.

The fundamental importance of this fragmentation, as well as the importance of our Planning Partnership, is clearly identified by Michael Gallis in the work he did for the Metropolitan Growth Alliance. After studying our region, Gallis concluded that, “its strength is in its diversity, its weakness is in its fragmentation”. He says, “How to celebrate our many individual parts, while building unity among the many pieces, is our greatest opportunity and our biggest challenge”.

This “greatest of all opportunities” and “biggest of all challenges” is the focus of the RPC Strategic Plan and the resulting Planning Partnership. The Partnership must celebrate the diversity of this county while building unity among the many pieces.

Gallis captured the essence of our challenge by comparing the parts of our community, our disjointed urban systems, to a pile of automotive parts that have limited value, unless assembled the right way -- into a useful engine.

He then compares our 49 fragmented political jurisdictions to the 26 letters of our alphabet -- letters that have little meaning by themselves, but together can create great literature.

Similarly, the Planning Partnership’s role will be to facilitate creative dialogue and collaboration to make the whole stronger than the parts.

WILLIAM HUDNUT.

Another urban expert, former Indianapolis mayor William Hudnut, also studied the Cincinnati region recently and said that our region suffers from tremendous balkanization of its political system. Hudnut’s observation is that this region is going out into the 21st century saddled with 19th century jurisdictional baggage that is woefully obsolete.

He delivered a very important message -- that the challenge of regionalism is not choosing between good and evil -- but to hold the proper balance between two goods -- one being the value of local autonomy, the other being concern and participation in the larger community.

The new Planning Partnership of the RPC will attempt to achieve such balance.

ISSUES.

The proposed RPC organization uses an expanded committee structure and a public forum format to increase awareness of, and promote collaboration on, a broader scope of countywide problems and opportunities. For example:

- Many of the inner suburban Hamilton County communities are experiencing population loss and related disinvestment that cannot be effectively reversed by any individual jurisdiction.
A countywide planning partnership is needed.

- The multitude of political jurisdictions brings divergent voices, and therefore reduced effectiveness, to the regional transportation funding table at OKI and to the State legislature in Columbus. *A unified voice and a countywide planning partnership is needed.*
- Internal competition, as if the County contains 49 separate economies, reduces our real economic competitiveness as a region. Communities independently attempting to climb to the top rung of fiscal health may find they are climbing the wrong wall. *A countywide planning partnership is needed.*
- Implementation of fragmented local plans without fully considering the interconnectedness of neighboring actions results in adverse or suboptimized regional consequences. The cumulative effect of such independent development decisions threatens our quality of life through gridlock, flooding, air and water pollution, and degradation of neighborhood character.

The lack of development coordination undermines the County's ability to improve mobility, implement mass transit corridors, avoid social and economic polarization and physical banalization, balance land use, and achieve air quality standards, economic vitality and desirable growth. *To successfully maintain and improve quality of life in Hamilton County, a countywide planning partnership is needed.*

The proposed changes expand RPC's countywide collaborative planning role (long term planning) while retaining the quality of its traditional development review role (administration of subdivision and zoning regulations). The revised structure and related strategies will assist Hamilton County communities in planning, aligning and achieving local development goals in the context of the region.

The concept of the Planning Partnership will soon be presented to the 49 cities and townships as well as other stakeholders and potential partners in Hamilton County. We'll ask for their comment, refinement and approval. Later this year, each jurisdiction will consider endorsement of the new cooperation agreement for the Planning Partnership and a new charter for the Regional Planning Commission.

As this Partnership grows and matures, the comprehensive planning effort being initiated by the Hamilton County Regional Planning Commission will help to identify the possibilities, opportunities and problems that exist on the horizon, from which we can derive a clearly articulated vision. With a collective vision in place, planning will make a difference.

It will help us invent ways we can create growth patterns that are responsive to the needs and values of people at all income levels, and also help maintain Hamilton County's quality of life and economic competitiveness. It will help us integrate the opposing forces of sub-urban and urban, pedestrian-friendly and auto-convenient.

Hamilton County's Planning Partnership together with the countywide comprehensive plan is intended to capture the values and perceptions of people from the three sectors of our society--

public, private and civic – so that planning can make a difference. As we launch this important dialogue, we encourage your participation.

Conclusion

The driving forces of post WWII federal policies and the inertia of entrenched development patterns certainly creates a formidable, if not awesome, challenge for planning in the 21st Century. We know that any attempt to improve the options as to how people in Hamilton County live will surely require a hard row against powerful currents of culture and history.

We will need to develop a long-term future orientation and realize that results must be measured in generations rather than years—an uncommon time horizon in government as well as private sector.

If we fail to come together and fail to develop a collective vision, we will be stuck with our do nothing plans, our de facto plans, the result we'll get from no plan – a legacy of wasted opportunity.

The Planning Partnership is being convened to think big and devise a broad and innovative strategy –not simply a bigger framework to fuel current dysfunctional trends.

The long term challenge is daunting, but we recognize that a foundation can be built on small actions and small components – and that serious problems still get fixed, piece by piece and great visions still get implemented piece by piece.

That's how planning is going to make a difference in Hamilton County.

**Hamilton County Regional
Planning Commission**

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